

EXPLORING METAPHYSICAL MEANING THROUGH
THE CONSTRUCTION OF PHYSICAL OBJECTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes to give physical form to a metaphysical system which does not reference any specific religion or spiritual philosophy.

It achieves this by accessing personal fantasy and dream images, mutated through a primordial urge to create physical objects, rather than any form of analysis, as a means of communion.

It is not possible to express such an abstract concept with images that have clearly pre-conceived attachments. However, it is necessary to retain sufficient familiarity to connect with feelings from an unconscious source.

The solution to this dilemma has been found in presenting an eclectic range of found and assembled objects that are connected in a seemingly random, but intuitively meaningful way, to provide an abstract narrative.

The abstraction has been aided by the use of vivid colour, chosen for its emotional intensity. In each work the range was limited, sometimes to a single colour, so that both the form and the colour have retained a separate identity.

The thesis contains material that acts as an interface, providing new images that can be incorporated into independent metaphysical narratives, which are mediated by the personal experience of each viewer.

CONTENTS

- 1. Introduction
- 2-4. Report
- 5. Slide collection and description of work
- 6. Conclusion
- 7. Reading list

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of this project, I was greatly perplexed by the notion of research, and how the totally subjective nature of my creative productions could be generalised into objective theory.

My reading was centred around Eastern philosophy and its Western interpretation through authors such as D. T. Suzuki, Christmas Humphreys, Allan Watts and Sogyal Rinpoche, and the writings of Western physicists such as Fritjof Capra, Darryl Reaney and Paul Davies, who highlight the parallels between contemporary theoretical physics and mystical systems of belief.

Their views about the unreliability of fundamental western assumptions, were reflected in suggestions from Roland Barthes that

...writing...remains full of the recollections of previous usage, for language is never innocent: words have a second order memory which mysteriously persists in the midst of new meaning.¹

This material led me to the view that verbal language is a self-corroborating system of the physical world, and not always reliable in demonstrating intent or interpretation in that context, so I felt very sceptical in using it in relation to the metaphysical. This view is supported by the opinion of Susan Sontag expressed in 'Against Interpretation'².

The only evidence of ourselves, other than our physical presence, is the residue of our activity. All things outside of us are constructs of a physical reality, but are not necessarily proof of an inner reality - that is, personal truth is not a function of the physical world, but may be approached through it in an abstract way.

Our own reality is a function of our personal story. We create it for ourselves in our own lifetime, and it is not transferable.

¹Barthes, Roland

'What is Writing? from Writing Degree Zero' in Barthes: Selected Writings. edited and introduced by Susan Sontag, Fontana, London 1982 p37.

²Sontag, Susan

Against Interpretation and other essays. Dell Pub. Co. New York 1966.

If the difficulty of representing experience is insurmountable, it implies that our personal truth will always remain unknown to others. It can only be translated into observable activity, and physical objects, which become the transferable phenomena that can be incorporated into another individual's idea or story, words remaining as indefinite social behaviour.

Ultimately I felt I could not realistically hope to convey any sense of my work through theoretical exposition, so throughout the project substituted social contact through personal anecdote and story as an alternative.

The main criticism from a formal point of view has been that this seems to lack 'academic authority', and may be 'dissembling' in intent. As the project was conceived as experiential with no closed results predicted, and that knowledge of my intent as author should not inhibit an appreciation of the work, I felt that it should not cause a problem in the final analysis.

I was encouraged with this approach when given an edited translation of a Dutch handbook on phenomenology, a branch of philosophy based on the writings of Edmund Husserl, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The authors observe that

...the mainstream social scientist believes the subjectivity of the personal must be overcome with the methods of science procedures designed to create precision, control, certainty: in a word objectivity. This is an ironical situation because it is impossible for a meaningful human science to be anything but subjective. Human beings live in an intersubjective world. if we doubt the trustworthiness of the subjective experience then we must interpret ordinary events as unreliable and idiosyncratic.

and

Every study is necessarily done personally and subjectively; none more so than the precise, controlled, objective one, because that always involves more intrusion than does observation of an ongoing event. Trying to escape subjectivity, by pretending to objectivity, also results in the loss of information.³

³Barritt, L; Beekman, T;
Bleeker, H; Mulderij, K

Researching Education Practice - a handbook on phenomenology.
University of North Dakota, 1985. p11 -12

They regard that the generality in this type of study comes from a shared understanding of an experience that the researcher describes, and that gesture and inflection are 'extralinguistic' ways of communicating.

Sartre stated that, from the phenomenological point of view, "consciousness of things is in no sense restricted to knowledge of them"⁴, and that Husserl's concept of 'Intentionality' describes the "need of consciousness to exist as the consciousness of something other than itself"⁵.

This paradoxical view of knowledge resurfaces more recently in Hans Bertens history of postmodernism -

*What postmodernity discovers (or, rather, rediscovers), is that rationality cannot ground itself....As a result, the idea of modern knowledge turns out to be a self-defeating proposition...reflection upon reflection is always the starting point of an infinite regression. And yet, inexplicably, the same rationalist reflection would seem to lead to universal and transcendent knowledge.*⁶

Can the narrative object, then, also be regarded as a 'behavioural alternative' - one that is a blending of the experience, the unconscious re-evaluation (relating the story), and the conscious speculation (organisation of thoughts into generalised fiction)? If so, I propose that communion can still occur whether or not the understanding is of a shared event, or the incorporation of a similar nature from a similar experience - provided that it is not interpreted either from the point of view of supposed 'content', or from speculation on the intent of its maker.

Sections 2 - 4 of this exegesis contain a selection of my own writing, that delineates a personal story in three parts. This does not describe the work or its specific origin, but forms a background to it. It is not necessary for a viewer to have this information to achieve an independent narrative, but it is included as a phenomenological report on the thesis.

⁴Sartre, Jean-Paul

'Intentionality' in *Incorporations*, Edited by Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, Urzone Inc., New York 1992 p.390.

⁵Ibid p.389

⁶Bertens, Hans

The Idea of the Postmodern.: A History. Routledge New York 1995 p.241

The lifeboat plunged through the surf crazily, as if to broach and capsize at any moment.

The 'Captain' managed with great skill to keep the vessel steady, and he felt justifiably proud as it suddenly lurched against the steep beach and everyone clambered out, amazed and relieved to have survived so far.

He wasn't really the captain. He had taken charge because he knew about navigation and survival at sea. The others had been mostly grateful, and even those who begrudged his leadership had accepted his knowledge and capability with relief.

Their first day on the island was spent in gloriously high spirits - a euphoric reaction to their time together in the small boat, during which they had come to believe that their emaciated bodies would never touch dry land again. They gorged themselves on nuts and fruit that grew abundantly in the lush forest, and bathed their sores and parched throats in the clear creek that pooled in the shaded green glades.

Their first task ashore together was to bury the survivor who had become unconscious just at the moment they landed, and died in spite of their good fortune. Naturally the 'Captain' took charge and organised everything in the way he felt was most respectful and appropriate.

Not everyone liked his arrangements however, and now that their greatest danger was over they allowed themselves the indulgence of disagreement. All the tensions that had built up during their confinement in the boat emerged, and the dispute rapidly became violent.

It was made quite clear that his authority was no longer needed nor wanted, and in angry indignation he left them to their fate - he would set up his own camp and live quite happily by himself.

He went as far away to the west as the island would allow and built his hut - a solid, well framed structure that he laboured over for many weeks. During this time the hard work and tiredness kept him contented - when he wasn't working on his shelter he was making fish-traps or collecting fruit and experimenting with edible herbs.

Soon he knew a lot about what the island offered for a comfortable life, and he decided he would return to show the others. The trip over the high land separating them was arduous, but the closer he got the more urgently he pressed on.

Suddenly he stopped to listen to an unfamiliar sound - there was nothing like this on his side of the island. At first he thought it was a strange bird, or water chuckling under rocks. He walked further, and it struck him painfully when he realised the sound was laughter.

He stopped and peered through the bushes. The campsite was in clear view on the edge of the forest - a higgledy-piggledy collection of flimsy shelters in a rough circle around a huge fireplace. The people were splashing in the water playing a game - he seemed to recognise no purpose in it.

In a rage he didn't question, he plunged through the trees - back to his own place. There he stomped about in a fury, pulling out bushes to clear around his hut, gutting fish and hurling the entrails into the sea. Gradually he calmed down, and settled into his routine once more.

Many months passed this time before he decided to return again. It was absurd, he reasoned, that such a small group could not agree and all get along together. He would go straight into their camp this time and suggest a truce.

Once more he struggled through the tangled scrub, over the high land and down the other side. He recognised the laughter immediately this time of course, and felt encouraged that they were such a contented group, and that he would be sharing that happiness very soon.

As he hurried along the worn path between the fruit trees and the camp, he glimpsed the communal fireplace and stopped dead in his tracks. He was stunned - two small children were playing together near their mothers who were preparing a meal on a large woven sheet. The shelters were more substantial now - the settlement was a village set amongst a provident garden.

For a long time he stared with a longing he dared not acknowledge. It was impossible to go on - he felt he could not interrupt their tranquillity, perhaps even frighten the children.

Upset and discouraged he returned again to his hut, and was appalled at the contrast - it was in poor condition outside, cold and dark inside.

Overwhelmed by loneliness and despair he could not hold back the sobbing that poured from him. He cried uncontrollably that night and all the next day too. This continued for so many days and nights that eventually his eyes and throat were so swollen that he could not pass another tear or another moan. He hadn't eaten during this time, and it seemed that the gnawing hunger in his stomach was his whole existence.

Now he often sat and watched the sun set on an empty horizon, whilst he grew thinner and weaker. Early one morning he gathered all his possessions together in the hut and set it alight. Burning furiously, the flames seared his face as he stood mesmerised by the speed at which his treasured belongings crumbled to ash.

When he was satisfied that there was no trace left, he surprised himself by placing a large white flower on the pyre. It sat in stark contrast to the dark heap until, overcome by the heat, it, too, shrivelled and blackened. As the bright yellow stamens collapsed, they gave up a wisp of blue smoke that trailed to his nostrils. It's acrid death scent woke him, and he immediately set out once more for the other side of the island.

Skirting the village out of ear-shot, he emerged on the beach and collapsed exhausted in the darkness. He slept easily and next morning began to build his new shelter. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see he was being watched closely, but no-one came over to offer help.

That night he sat at his fire and observed, so that he might discover who had become their leader - he would obviously have to negotiate with whomever it was.

He co-ordinated his daily routine with theirs. When they went fishing, he went. When they went collecting fruit, he also went into the forest, but kept his distance. When they gathered around the fire at night to sing and dance, he sat at his own and consoled himself with the hope that one day he would join them.

Eventually he left his second hut to build a new one much closer. He noted, almost without realising, that when it was complete the style was different - it was much more like those in the village, lighter and more elegant.

Now he could hear their voices and felt less lonely. He learned their songs and sang them when they did. He also made up his own songs and sang them as he worked. Some of them

were about his isolation, his unhappiness, and his sorrow - others were about love and joy and hope.

Sometimes he crept closer and hid in the bushes near enough to hear their conversations - he never had been able to discover who was their leader. Some were always the first to sing, others always the first to dance (often the children), and the work always just seemed to get done. He heard many giving opinions, and sometimes loud disagreements - but never any consensus, nor any decisions being reached.

One thing he did notice - they were always giving each other things. Usually it was just little things, like a shell or a brightly coloured feather, but always a great fuss was made over it, as if it were the most precious thing in the whole world!

And they never ate what they collected themselves. He once saw two people search for the ripest, plumpest fruit they could find, and then they swapped them before biting into them with juice running from their grins. Occasionally someone would work for days, or even weeks, on a special object such as a piece of clothing or a necklace. As soon as it was finished it was given away.

One day while he was hidden, a spark flew from the fire. A hut burst into flames and rapidly burned to the ground. One of the children began to cry, and everyone gathered around to hug and comfort her. He felt great sympathy for her as he watched, assuming she had lost some treasured possession. Then suddenly he noticed that her crying had changed to laughter as she was passed from one to another.

Everyone went off along the beach to look for new building materials, and he desperately wanted to help. Going off by himself amongst the forest, he eventually found a small tree bent in a sweeping arch - pinned down by a larger tree that had forced it to grow into a perfect doorframe. After clearing all the earth away with his bare hands, he smashed the shallow fibrous roots with a rock, and struggled with his cumbersome load down to the village. He left it there whilst everyone was away bathing in the cool creek to escape the scorching sun. Returning to his own home, he cleaned his wounds - torn fingernails and scratches from head to foot.

That night at his fire, he watched the group joyfully sharing a feast together. He counted nine children now, the oldest nearly a full grown adult - strong, graceful and confident. He also noticed how some of the original survivors were beginning to look old and frail.

He had been thrilled to see them use his tree - not, however, as the main door as he had expected, but as a support for a small store at the rear. Nevertheless they had accepted it, and they had often looked in his direction.

When the singing started, he sang with them as usual - songs about where they had come from, their lives in the 'old land', and their lives now in their new place of abundance and joy.

He sang louder and louder, until he was sure they could hear him - he had never dared before, but he no longer cared.

For the first time in years his happiness was undiluted by resentment and expectations. As his spirit sang from within him, he even forgot to hope that the others would invite him to join them - he just became himself.

After a deep contented sleep, when he dreamed of playing with children, embracing friends, and exchanging stories and knowledge of the new land, he awoke with a new understanding. He would remain as he was - separate, but close by.

The sun rose and he was warmed by it.

Then he saw the parcel at his doorway.

It was a fish - a common fish that he could have easily caught any day for himself, but it was wrapped in a soft and beautiful cloth finely woven from bark fibres.

There was also a piece of broken mirror, set into one half of a nutshell. It fitted into the palm of his hand, and he carefully moved it around until he had seen the whole of his face.

As the life-extending equipment dripped and blipped away, my mother asked why we, that is, all of her children, had left home so early. There had been a good reason in each case, but I could only tell her of mine.

At twelve years old I had been accused of sexually abusing a small girl along the street. Whilst my mother cried in the back room, my father gravely escorted me into my bedroom and informed me that they knew I had been 'playing with' this girl, and, as long as it stopped, it would be forgotten.

Now, I had been playing exploratory games with girls of my own age for some time, so I couldn't feign absolute innocence of the crime, but the thought of indulging my curiosity with this small child, who had nothing to offer in return, had not occurred to me. However, my blushes would have confirmed my guilt to anyone, and my weak denial didn't seem convincing, even to me.

My father wasn't someone I could argue with, so I was resigned to the embarrassment and shame I felt as I cycled on my way to school, past that little girl's house, every day for the next three years. As soon as I could legally leave school, I left that street, in fact scurried to the other end of the country.

That incident had burned as an unjustified twinge of guilt in the back of my mind for 33 years, until my mother's question. I hadn't raised the issue with my parents, in spite of my life long resentment that they had believed I was a wicked child molester.

As she lay there, surrounded by whiteness, plastic tubes and unhomely smells, I told her, hoping that in this moment, the only real moment of private honesty between us in our lives, she would believe something of fundamental importance to my knowledge of myself, as she had done with me.

She simply replied "I know you didn't". This unexpected response confused me for a moment, and before anticipating the consequence, I asked "Then why did you let me think that you believed that?". I immediately bit my tongue, because I suddenly knew the answer before she confirmed it. Subsequent events had led to an obvious conclusion without my having made the connection before. The bitterness in her voice and her vacant

eyes seemed both painful and pathetic. So, all this time I had been my father's scapegoat.

It has been suggested that my stories are apocryphal. This scepticism is a relief in one way. It allows me to bury some memories in stone coffins - stone sedimented from words in which I could become fossilised if caught using them too often.

I have a great mistrust of descriptions, events and sentiments expressed through words, preferring to rely instead on my own activity to define my own reality, and the effects of the world around me to describe the field in which I must operate.

Some of the major 'effects' are the behaviour packages of those lives that run parallel to my own for various parts of it. Parallel because it seems that experiences, like bus tickets, are non-transferable. They can be offered for inspection voluntarily, or by default. They may be examined superficially, or they may be the cause of heavy-duty introspection. One thing is certain - that they will be perceived idiosyncratically, and often unpredictably.

So what does it mean then, to tell a story that will inevitably be received with a variety of responses?.

The story I have just recalled may be true, in which case my father comes out of it rather badly, by most people's standards. It may be untrue, in which case I would agree that, by the same standards, I could be regarded as reprehensible for implicating my own father in the way that I have.

There may be a more complicated scenario in which I am prepared to compromise either, or both, our reputations for some metaphoric advantage. I might choose to call this autobiographical, or distance myself from it and suggest that it is completely imaginary. An opinion about my father or myself may be altered or remain the same in the process.

The effects will remain largely outside of my control, but could depend to some extent on how I may have learnt to manipulate an audience through knowledge of expectations and responses. Any control I may assert will, no doubt, have a mixture of selfish and altruistic motives. The extent to which these motives operate at any time, and the extent to which my

audience will find these acceptable will vary, probably unpredictably.

What do I achieve with this approach? Why tell a story that could be true, and then deliberately create confusion about its credibility?

Well, I want to draw your attention to something. Is the story about this something? - indirectly I assume it is, but it is difficult to be precise about something that is both ambiguous and enigmatic.

Philosophers will isolate a particular concern and attempt to define it linguistically. They do not necessarily take a direct approach, however, because of the semantic problems of using language to describe something that is not in itself a linguistic issue. They will typically ask not "What is this?", but "What does it mean if we ask this question?"

A net will be cast loosely around the inquiry, and gradually drawn together until a vital question remains flapping and struggling in the purse, hopefully close enough for us to grasp with our own faculties. It cannot be picked up and handed over as it is non-transferable, but must be gathered in separately by each person.

This is the reason the same questions continually recur in philosophy, and why it is still pertinent to concern ourselves with them.

When we stand in front of an object, does it make any sense to ask "Is it true?". There are other questions which would seem fairly straightforward, and could be discussed endlessly, with subtle differences of opinion.

Its macro-physical nature can be measured in terms of material, colour, weight, construction and size. Its micro-physical presence can be analysed in terms of its particulate nature or energy quantities. Its sentience can be argued about in degrees of self-consciousness. Its origins can be speculated upon, and favoured theories about the origins of matter come and go. There is a possibility that we are getting closer to a truth, and this may or may not be so. The belief that we are certainly motivates much research and alternative theory.

But does it make any sense to ask “Is it true?” when we are confronted by the object? If we consider either ourselves or the things we make as the object in question, then the problem becomes more complicated, because we can never disassociate ourselves from our own self interest.

The question is not the same as asking if there is any illusion present, intended or otherwise. It could be that if illusion is the result of intellectual artifice, then this question could never be separated from our assumptions about what truth is.

Descartes was dealing with the fundamental issue of illusion when he decided that his conscious identity was sufficient cause for him to believe in his own existence. This has become a basic premise for western thinking, and is not so different, in a way, from the practical end result of eastern beliefs.

Hindu-Buddhist precepts are based on the agreement that the world is illusion, but that this does not preclude the necessity for conducting a daily life according to karmic principles of ‘rightness’. And you will keep coming back until you do!

Perhaps we could be so bold as to suggest that, as we can imagine our own existence, then anything we can imagine may be true.

Whether or not we personally believe that we will get more than one bite at the cherry, both Eastern and Western systems lead us to the same observation that here and now is what we have available to us. It will always be here and now. If there is some value in pursuing a sense of rightness or truth, then it must be present activity that gets us there.

I have the feeling that this is leading to that thing I wanted to draw your attention to. “Thank goodness” I hear you whisper - but not so fast! I feel unable, yet, to precisely put my finger on what it is. It seems cliched to use the terms that have become common in contemporary religio-philosophic systems, yet that is the area in which I want to stay.

I am well aware of the common subterfuge of seeking an external cause to conceal an inadequacy we do not wish to own. I may be taking advantage of this in displaying a reluctance to

communicate verbally. However, it works both ways - verbal communication can be a sophisticated smokescreen wherein we can elude the fundamental behavioural responsibilities we perceive as too onerous, fearsome or confusing.

Each of us must behave in the way that seems to confirm our own sanity. It seems to me that the cunning intellect has, at the same time, the means to elaborate, complicate and mystify, as well as to unwrap, loosen and clarify. I often find it difficult to gauge when each intent is operating. One of its illusory methods is that of linear logic - the sequential presentation of supporting information that cumulatively corroborates itself, a ladder towards the holy grail that is defined by intellectual achievement.

Sometimes sideways or backward steps are the way forward. "About it is not it", we learn from the Tao Te Ching, that collection of Chinese wisdom from at least 2,500 years ago. Things haven't changed.

It has been discovered that the sponge is a symbiotic community of animal cells. Within the community there are groups that are quite different in their morphology and function. There are sphincter-like types that congregate around 'pores' and regulate the flow of water into the inner sanctum, ciliate cells that create an internal flow, digestive cells that absorb nutrients, and those that calcify to create an immovable structure.

Not too unlike ourselves, except for one fundamental difference. Each cell, if separated from the parent sponge can reproduce a whole new community which settles down into a differentiated, but cooperative, group just like the one it came from, barring genetic mutation.

Only our reproductive cells have retained this ability, the capacity to slavishly replicate the physical status quo. Leaving aside the discussion on physical evolution, our clever little packages of DNA have acquired from somewhere the bizarre ability to manifest a sense of 'self' and 'otherness' on a level incompatible with the physical self. Incompatible in the sense that we see a 'duality', a kind of intrigue, between the physical and non-physical.

The sensational aspect of this, is that every time the 'self' thinks, it is in the very act of recreating itself. It manifests

itself through communication, but to suggest which sort of communication is more purposeful than another, would imply some knowledge of an ultimate quality - the shaman's domain. This mysticism is as prone to as much delusion as would be an insistence upon a mundane method of logic. If we accept the non-transferable nature of experience, it means we can only truly rely on our own experience, and what we think it means to ourselves.

If the object, the residue of our activity, is the tangible evidence of the non-transferable, it will possibly be most unique and meaningful when it has the closest possible connection with the experience. Even if we can contrive this, the destiny of the object, be it artefact, word or act, or a combination of these, can only be that it will never describe anything.

What use are these objects then? Can they serve any purpose? Can they be true? Is it only the undefining that can have any relevance beyond the individual self?

I wake up, and through the porthole next to my bunk I see the boats and fish-punts doubled down in the slick black water of the dock, the floating rubbish breeze-collected in the corners.

Sometimes the surface is impenetrable, ruffled by wavelets, or marbled with oil and slime dotted here and there with leaves and polystyrene cups.

This morning it is Alice's looking glass - shapes appear in the depths, vague and mysterious. They have that uncanny ability to entice and repel - the plastic municipal rubbish bin, menacingly camouflaged with tentacles of grey-green weed, its wheels rooted in the black ooze, waves its half open lid as the dock breathes through the narrow bridge. The 44 gallon drum, half buried, sits like a giant plug-hole, ready to suck out everything in the dock, in a whirlpool of rigging and chips with tomato sauce. The crushed aluminium cans, glimmer like false enticements amongst the seastars, who lumber silently, exuding sweet innocence.

Slipping through the looking glass is every bit as unnerving as its promise foretells. Despite the shoal of small fish which

disappear like glitter in a snow-dome, this is no wonder-sea of open beach and rocky headland. It is the murky evidence of human habitation and carelessness.

This day there is no streaming sunlight to soften the threat of tons of black slimy hull, suspended incredibly just feet above my head. The grimy particles, sucked up from below by my intrusion, choke me without my needing to draw breath. I clutch the bronze rigging screw my clumsiness had sent there, as my lungs scream to be out of it. Whilst drying off I shudder, not from the cold.

Do we know more about the sponge by examining it? The biologist will define it as a living creature, an animal, and record its behaviour. The chemist will examine the chemical reactions that occur during the period of its life. The physicist will delve into the most obscure depths of the matter of which it is composed, and conclude that it exists as 'non-living' forces. It may be represented visually, or through poetic language, used superficially as metaphor. All this information may help philosophical deduction about its presence.

We end up with an intellectual formula for it, but never able to enter it into an equation with ourselves, unless we can discover the magical coefficient that will allow us to incorporate the nature of the sponge intuitively. Until then it can have no relevance beyond the physical.

Can the object be true?

Is it possible that a creative thought cannot be transferred through even the most inspired translational intermediary? All translation slightly modifies the original concept, and the peculiar visual, verbal and comprehension differences between the maker and receiver makes their transaction unimaginably difficult. I presume the difficulties are unimaginable simply because attempts at transaction never cease.

Roaming around in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, I came across Anish Kapoor's stones with black holes. Immediately intrigued, to a far greater degree than any image of them had prepared me for, I had to lean over, peer into one of them, and eventually run my fingers around the lip of those black chambers. As I was hastily moved on by the attendant, I was unable to squeeze between their solid emptinesses.

Nearby were Yves Klein's blue torso, which I was prevented from licking by the hovering hawk, and Ken Unsworth's suspended stones, which I would dearly loved to have lain under. As it was, I was nearly escorted from the place for stepping over the line and gently pushing against one of the stones.

I was ready to kill that man - I mean it, I wasn't myself. Those three objects together had reproduced a feeling I had at Stonehenge years ago, when you could still walk amongst those great monoliths. Running my hands into the carved notch on a fallen lintel, my hackles rose. Suddenly I was someone else - someone familiar, more animal. I growled out loud, and tried to lift that stone back into place. It was only a moment, but during that moment I had lived another life. The stone still lies there - so do the open mouths of the two witnesses.

A different, but similarly intense, feeling was produced by Mike Parr's beeswax wedge and Anne MacDonald's black flowers, arbitrarily near each other in the Art Gallery of Western Australia. They had a combined effect that neither had separately. I have tried to explain it, but can only say that it was non-physical experience that came through my skin.

On Rottneest Island there is an old abandoned military installation. One overgrown bunker reminded me of an army pillbox at Heacham in England, not because it resembled the massive round concrete gun cubby-house, but because of the narrow, dark, horribly intimidating entrance. The Heacham one was filled with sloppy, silage-stinking cow shit, and the farmer told me that "the cows go in there out of the rain - pack in like Jews in a gas oven". I knew he meant something sinister, but as a small boy with no knowledge of the war, the only image my mind came up with was one of my mother putting a tray of jelly-babies into the gas oven at home.

It is a common delusion that if we cannot cope with the physical to describe what is meaningful, we can always open up that bag of tricks - the intuition! There is nothing more powerful than the totally elusive. Intuition is so elusive that we can always rely on it when all else fails. However, as a mental construct, even this is only part of the net - just another spoke in the wheel.

I like the metaphor that is repeated in the Tao Te Ching -
 Thirty spokes converge on a single hub,
 but it is in the space where there is nothing
 that the usefulness of the cart lies.

My physical life has led to sculpture and boats and relationships. My intellectual life has led to the intuitive belief that I have most to offer you in showing you a sculpture, or taking you for a sail. Rhetoric may be a whole lot more convenient, but it is only in my activity that I can create a commitment to our relationship..

The motivation for this commitment comes from that source which I cannot articulate - the thing that I want to draw your attention to. I see my own work as part of that cooperative effort to draw attention to the indescribable. However, the elusive nature of an experience is only relative to the essence of that to which it subtends, and a translation of it is even further removed.

I enjoy the sociability of words. They keep us together and entertained for a while. There's nothing like the good yarn, a joke, a scientific treatise, the discussion about whether you would prefer to die of the heat or cold, whilst sailing through a squall, hail drawing blood from your face. Words are useful for the pragmatic concerns of secular life.

However, it may be that only by dreaming the dream we can incorporate its function. To discuss its origins, or to speculate upon its meaning, may only obscure its value which is probably best left to the intuition.

When it comes to sharing something of the indescribable, I feel inadequate to the task, except to refer you to the object, and the question - "Is it true?",

"Is it true?" - a koan to confound the mind, to bypass the intellect, to solicit an incorporation.

Is it sufficient for us to exclaim "Cor, look!", and for the response to be "Yeah!"?

On the mountain top surrounded by mist, how far can we see?

Unable to sound each others eyes, we sip from the same pool.

Quivering with curious anticipation, Aldebaran gave up all futile attempts at steering his boat, letting it be sucked into the vortex at the centre of the storm.

He had heard about a sailor who had miraculously escaped from inside the rim of one of these whirlpools. The man had seen into the depths of it, but his vessel had been swept out on a powerful eddy that had set it outside the reach of the forces that would have plucked him into its mystery. That man had never spoken again and had died with an unfathomable glaze in his eyes.

Now his own point of no return had arrived - the boat accelerated in the turbulent current, and the circular horizon of white-capped waves enclosed around him. The sky diminished to a pale grey disc - no longer above, but always to starboard as he went deeper, and was held by centrifugal force to the now-smooth sides of the revolving, vertical, tunnel.

A heavy lethargy seeped into his limbs, his internal organs seemed to stop functioning, and a red curtain fell, prickling, across his eyes. Just before passing out completely, he realised he was now wide awake and enveloped by the redness.

Looking up from where he comfortably lay, the sky had diminished to a small star-like spot directly above him. The wreckage of the boat, and all his belongings, were scattered in a wide circle around him - up to the point where the velvety redness curved upwards to the light-speck way above.

Gradually, he stood and began to test his surroundings. He found that the whole surface around him, and upon which he walked, would envelop his hands and feet, but he could neither see through it, nor move any other part of his body into it. He also discovered that wherever he placed objects - above, below or beside him - they would remain hovering until he moved them again.

Although there was no night or day (as he remembered it) in this place, he was vaguely aware of some movement. He could not call it time, as there was nothing to measure it by. Occasionally, however, he felt hungry and ate some of his provisions.

At first there seemed no urgent reason to find a way out. His body always felt at ease, as the misty redness had a way of settling on his skin, like the soothing memory of gentle kisses. Nevertheless, a restlessness and claustrophobia eventually plagued him. Seeking a way out of his predicament, he built four window frames and placed them at what he imagined were the cardinal points of the compass. There was no way of checking if they were right. Although he could see nothing through them except the same redness that completely enveloped him, they created a more settled sense of being in a defined space.

Torn with anxiety as he drank the last of his water, he looked around and noticed a trickle of liquid running down the strange sides of his tomb, as if falling through air. He licked it. It tasted and felt like licking the juices from the inside of his woman's thighs. Suddenly his loneliness seemed overwhelming.

At the most intense moment of his loss, a black swan floated toward him. He was overjoyed with the company of this living thing, and taking some of the meagre morsels of bread he had left, he threw them to the swan to attract it nearer. Although the swan kept its distance, it was still a comforting source of energy for the man, and he decided on a way to escape.

Using every piece of material from the wreck, he began to construct a very long ladder. No matter how tall the ladder became, and no matter how small the pieces were, or how flimsily they were put together, it always stayed firmly in place, and he was able to keep climbing to the top with new scraps to add to it.

Occasionally he would have to stop to rest and eat, and each time he would feed the swan. Eventually as it swam closer, he became aware of a shadowy movement always just behind it. This was so intriguing he tried to step toward the bird, but it just disappeared from view.

No matter how much effort went into building the ladder, the target remained dim - a forlorn desire. Each time he climbed down, the swan had returned and he fed it. Each time it was a little closer and the shadow became a little clearer. Eventually, to his surprise and delight, he realised the shadow was actually a red swan - so like the redness around, that he could only see it if he kept his gaze on the black one.

Both birds moved together so nonchalantly - dipping their heads to feed, preening and splashing redness over their backs - so perfectly in unison that it was hard to see them as separate. From the first moment he had seen them, their unhurried concert had been so smooth and deliberate, that he now longed to know that graceful ease.

He believed it belonged to the comfort and warmth of fire, and now he needed its familiarity. Everything combustible had long since been used to construct the ladder that had never changed the size of the point of light. Giving up all hope of escape, he resigned himself to dismantling the ladder, piece by piece, to fuel the sparkling yellow flames. The warming glow reflected from the redness and entered his ears as music.

Eventually he tried talking to the swans, because he feared that his lack of conversation would result in no longer being able to think rationally. It was enormously frustrating to him that, with every word, they drifted further away. Only when he kept quiet and still, and held food out for them, did they return. At last it dawned on him that, although not to speak may risk misunderstanding, to speak was death.

He stood with the last of his food in the palm of his hand. Should he eat it himself, or give it to the swans? Without regret he threw it.

As he drifted away through the mist, he felt his red shadow at his shoulder. In the distance behind him, he saw a man sitting at a yellow fire.

SLIDES AND COMMENTS ON THE WORK

(Numbers in the text refer to numbers in red on the slides)

The slides are arranged in chronological order as far as possible, the group shots being of works presented together for critiques at intervals through the project.

In some cases, elements from earlier work are recycled in later pieces, for example 18 reappears in 28 and 29, 21 is rearranged into a more complex piece 36.

Initially there was a tendency to produce a weathered looking surface (1-14), which referred back to previous work where I had used only natural wood, red and yellow ochre and bitumen paint.

I was interested in the contrast between a single sheet of galvanised steel and another organic element. In most cases the steel was patinated to a weathered pale grey, using hydrochloric and oxalic acids. Sometimes the two elements were better integrated, such as in 3 and 12, at other times the steel seemed only to be a frustrating barrier and was better removed; 5-6 and 9-10.

Vivid colour was creeping in, in a fairly tentative way (2 and 10), but having been impressed with the remarkable way in which Yves Klein and Anish Kapoor had used intense, often single, colour, I decided to use the same device with a range of colours to test my reaction to them on my work (15 - 27). Solver scenic paint was suitable in a limited but useful range, but I had to be careful in mixing shades because they soon lost their liveliness. When this happened, a small amount of fluorescent paint was added to regain the intensity.

I am satisfied that the object and the colour retain a separate integrity, and that the flat paint has a softness that allows the surface texture of the material to show through well (16).

The strength of the colour is also a good indication of the level of emotion associated with the source images - many from fantasy and dreams, although often highly altered during the

process of construction. The choice of colour was intuitive relative to any specific object, and is not intended to dictate any particular emotion.

The objects themselves always point to the activity of a maker. My background is in construction, as a builder and furniture maker, and the actual process of body involvement, and the experience of the time taken to complete something, is always important to me. I relate strongly to sculpture such as that of Martin Puryear⁷, although his evident craftsmanship is an aspect I do not pursue. The absorption in the activity is crucial, although at the end of it I am happy for it to be untitled and anonymous - simply to stand as a record of a moment of private contemplation, like the results of Shaker work practice⁸. This was expressed by Kapoor as

*Working is something to do with contemplation... The most important thing that one is doing is making a transformation. That act of transformation is the same as an act of prayer, consecrating a particular time which is separated from one's ordinary life. The same is true of the transformation of the character of the place in which work is made or shown.*⁹

In the later work I have returned to using sheet steel as a rigid, discordant, aspect of the of the object, but have integrated it by having the other elements penetrate or interact with it more closely, achieving a more dynamic relationship.

Lighting has become a more complex issue, in some cases coloured light being an integral part of the object (35 and 38).

In some instances the works complement each other to a degree where it is difficult or inappropriate to separate them (39 and 40). This produces a mass of detail which is quite distinct from those pieces that operate better independently, and reflects the varying complexity of the source material.

⁷See, for instance, Martin Puryear by Neal Benezra, Thames and Hudson and the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago Illinois 1991.

⁸For excellent photographs see Shaker Life Work and Art by June Sprigg and David Larkin, Cassell, London 1987.

⁹Sculpture Since 1945. Edward Lucie-Smith, Phaidon Press Ltd. , Oxford 1987 p140.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion to the thesis is necessarily embodied in the work itself. This is not to say that it has arrived at an identifiable end point, rather it is evidence of a particular type of activity, which is a physical translation of an inquiry.

The project was about expanding a personal repertoire of communicating something about a sense of the non-physical self. The intention was that this would leave a trace of evidence that could be incorporated into other individual inquiries, that do not rely on shared belief systems.

From a mechanistic point of view, the work would be regarded as a 'result' which could be quantified relative to the means whereby it was produced.

However, it seems more useful to see it as part of a 'network system' - an idea formulated by Capra in response to his observation of a paradigm shift in a wide variety of fields of human activity. This allows for an equivalent interdependence of information, rather than a linear accumulation of knowledge based on data presumed to be fundamental.

The virtually simultaneous impingement of the physical and metaphysical in ordinary life, paralleled by the abrupt transition between story and discursive style in the main text (sections 2 -4) has produced, in this case, a body of sculpture that adds something to a network of information. It is neither illustrative nor interpretive of its source, and therefore has a fundamental equivalence with the inquiry, and the activity that connects the two.

This is important from a viewer's perspective, because, in most cases, it is the only information presented, and creates it's own relevance. As it does not attempt to be definitive, it retains the possibility to cross individual boundaries.

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